

Walk like a woman, talk like a man: Ivy Queen’s troubling of gender

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Abstract This article examines how Ivy Queen deploys particular codes of masculinity and femininity in her music and performances. By drawing comparisons with other singers, I analyze what this deployment reveals about gender and its role in reggaetón, in music more generally, and in mass culture. I argue that Ivy Queen’s particular engagement with gender opens up a space to interrogate gender norms and their relationship with power in the consumption of mass cultural forms.

Keywords Reggaetón · Gender · Music · Performance · Ivy Queen · Mass culture

In his essay “The Grain of the Voice,” Roland Barthes (1988) argues that vocal styles can either efface or highlight the material production of sound. A technical virtuoso may easily mask the conditions and “work” of production so that all we hear is the note produced. In other cases, however, the very lack of technical mastery—the idiosyncratic “flaws” of particular singing styles—call attention to the physicality of the body (the throat, the tongue, the lips, the torso) and the effort required; that is, the resulting sound records evidence of the process rather than a seemingly disembodied product. As with exposed wood, the “grain” provides a texture that evokes its materiality and its historicity. We hear not simply the music, but—in its very inability to perfectly adhere to the prescribed norm—the corporeal individual in a dialogic relationship with established musical conventions. In this sense, a voice that has a notable “grain”—a rasp, a textured quality—challenges the universality and legitimacy of a genre’s norms. By calling attention to the limitations or exclusions of embodied performance, it fundamentally questions demarcations of appropriateness and deviance, of “harmony” and “discord.”

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Fig. 1 Chavela Vargas

Barthes' analysis therefore points to the critical potential of not only nonnormative vocal and performance styles but also of dissonance in music more generally. Through their discordant emphasis on the corporeal, unconventional voices can call attention to underlying assumptions about gender that might otherwise remain invisible (and inaudible). A singing style, register, or affectation that is somehow “out of tune” disrupts the dominant flow of the music; in doing so, moreover, it interrogates the packaging that is generally consumed uncritically in established listening practices—especially those associated with mass cultural forms.

Latin@ American music is replete with examples of female singers whose vocal timbre and performative style challenge conventions in the way Barthes outlines. One of the most salient examples of this trend is Chavela Vargas. Isabel Vargas Lizano, better known as Chavela Vargas, was a performer of Mexican ranchera music and boleros. She is renowned for her deep and raspy voice along with her nonnormative image (often described as androgynous, butch, or transgendered) (Fig. 1).

As Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano (1997) aptly analyzes, Vargas also challenged dominant norms by shifting the conventional sexual politics of rancheras/boleros¹ and positioning herself as the (lesbian) desiring subject. Chavela thus emblemizes a notable tradition in which Latin@ American performers play with gender norms through particular deployment of their vocal range and texture, musical conventions, and a stylized appearance. As numerous scholars have argued, this particular engagement with gender norms can be an effective strategy of empowerment, yet it also proves contradictory and problematic.²

In this essay, I analyze a similar phenomenon of gender play in reggaetón. Reggaetón is a fundamentally transnational genre that not only owes its enormous popularity to the growing Latin@ diaspora, but also directly engages the

¹ These genres are more commonly performed by male singers who avow their desire for elusive/unattainable women or—even more typically—lament the suffering and betrayal caused by unworthy women.

² Frances R. Aparicio (1999), Licia Fiol-Matta (2017), and María Elena Cepeda (2003), for example, offer nuanced analyses of this phenomenon.



soundscapes and the amalgam of musical traditions that inform Latin@ experiences. Given its popularity and its historical evolution, the cultural values associated with reggaetón acquire particular significance. In order to evaluate the “grain” of gender within this context, I focus on the case of Ivy Queen. Not only is Ivy Queen a highly successful female artist in a male-dominated genre, but she also challenges the more phallogocentric roots of the genre, drawing on a transnational archive of performance and cutting across conventional boundaries. I trace how her music both depends on and critically interrogates conventional demarcations of gender. Her work offers, I argue, a politics and poetics of gender with resonances that can—and should—be felt throughout Latin@ America.

As Vazquez (2008, p. 304) avers, Ivy Queen's voice inserts her into a particular lineage of performers with similarly low and raspy voices, yet Vazquez's analysis also points to a particular engagement of gender:

Her voice signals other genealogies of women vocalists from Latin/a America. Its grumble reminds us of others who have so bravely and unapologetically resided in or dipped into the lower reaches of the vocal range. Myrta Silva, Toña la Negra, Freddy, La Lupe, Lisette Melendez, and Judy Torres are all part of the vocal lineage that leads to Ivy Queen. Her voice has a deep sound and withholding, a quality that comes from keeping things locked up in your chest, a place where you've temporarily stuffed a few things so you don't explode. It has the kind of hoarseness that sounds like having to constantly speak above things.

According to this characterization, Ivy Queen's voice has the “grain” described by Barthes: it scratches precisely in a way that unearths that which tends to remain hidden; it gives resonance to a kind of selectivity that is obscured or effaced by more conventional voices.

Although Ivy Queen's voice is one of her more notable attributes, it is not the only means through which the singer challenges gender norms. Throughout her career, this reggaetonera has repeatedly deployed masculinity and femininity in a way that fundamentally challenges the dominant norms of the genre. In her music, her appearance, and her style, she capitalizes on—commodifies, even—a particular interweaving of gender roles. In the end, her power is derived precisely from her ability to effectively manipulate the codes of masculinity and femininity traditionally associated with reggaetón.

Dame más gasolina: Gender in reggaetón

Reggaetón is a phenomenon as fascinating as it is disturbing, as captivating as it is annoying. I base this assertion not only on my own relationship with the genre but also on countless reviews, blog posts, comments on YouTube and informal conversations. Recent scholarship on the topic, moreover, reflects similar assessments. In his foreword for Raquel Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez's landmark volume, *Reggaeton* (Rivera et al. 2008), Juan Flores suggests that the genre inspires such responses because it is the first truly transnational



phenomenon, on the one hand, and it is markedly Latin@ American on the other. Unlike other musical genres that have achieved international recognition, Flores asserts, reggaetón cannot be traced to a specific place of origin; instead, it is born precisely of the diasporic/translocal flows that have characterized Caribbean peoples and cultures for centuries. At the same time, its detractors cannot easily dismiss reggaetón as an unfortunate import. For better and for worse, it is fundamentally ours—he concludes—in language, rhythms, and migratory patterns.

Aside from its transnational essence and ostensibly rebarbative qualities, one of the most salient features of reggaetón is its performance of masculinity. Reggaetón is hypermasculine to an extreme. Not only are the overwhelming majority of the performers men, but the music tends to range from exceedingly phallogocentric to downright misogynistic. As Wayne Marshall (2006) notes, “descriptions of sexual acts and female bodies alternate between explicit language and innuendo, and women rarely appear as anything other than objects of the male gaze.” The lyrics tout the prowess of their male protagonists/performers, and the inclusion of female “characters” tends to be restricted to derisive dismissal and to the amassing of them as conquests, evincing the aforementioned superiority of the singer. Women’s voices are rarely heard; their auditory presence is generally limited to intercalated responses to and/or affirmations of male desirability and dominance: the “*dame más gasolina*” [give me more gasoline] in response to Daddy Yankee’s (2004) “*A ella le gusta/le encanta la gasolina*” [She likes/loves gasoline] or the verses of Winsin and Yandel’s (2005) “*Rakatá*,” dotted with the occasional, “*Papi, dame lo que quiero*” [Baby, give me what I want]—to name just two notable examples.³ Indeed, Vazquez (2008, p. 304) argues that this call-and-response structure in which the female voice is reduced to merely reacting to male desire is so ubiquitous in reggaetón that it becomes a recognizable structure within the genre.

The principal defining characteristics of reggaetón lie in particular rhythms (e.g., Dem Bow) and instruments.⁴ Nonetheless, as with other contemporary genres, a specific set of soundscapes, listening practices, dances, images, and styles are also closely associated with it. Performers and audiences alike tend to adhere to an established set of conventions in their language, dance moves, interactions, and fashion; deviation from these norms is noted, and the reception of a particular artist is often affected (if not determined) by the relative degree of adherence to these conventions.

Given this intersection of music, style, and image, it is not surprising that music videos play such an important role in the exchange flows of the genre. Reggaetón videos consistently reproduce and reinforce the sexual politics averred in the song lyrics. As with other contemporary genres, the videos that accompany these songs are replete with scantily clad women who pose and gyrate around the male leads. They are window dressing, commodities to be amassed and consumed by the

³ The term *papi* is a typical term of endearment in Spanish, used for partners, children, and sometimes even affectionately with friends. I have rendered it as “baby” in the English translation in an attempt to capture its colloquial function. It should be noted, however, that the term is coded as markedly masculine and would be more literally translated as “Daddy.”

⁴ In “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo,” Marshall (2008) offers a thorough, in-depth account of the origins, evolution, and principal elements of reggaetón.



macho. This phenomenon is clearly exemplified in the video for N.O.R.E.'s (2006) "Oye mi Canto," a song closely associated with the mainstream popularizing of the genre. Although the song admittedly features interventions by female performers (Nina Skye), the lyrics highlight a concatenation of Latin@ American objects of consumption—*tabaco*, *ron*, *nalgadas en el culo* [tobacco, rum, and smacks on the ass], and reggaetón itself—all presented as "what they want." After a brief introduction, the video presents a small group of women singing and dancing in a framed box or stage,⁵ but this scene quickly gives way to a beach landscape in which the camera moves sinuously along a line of women, grinding and gyrating to the song, dressed in bikinis designed in the style of various Latin@ American flags. In this fashion, the camera offers an unwrapping or striptease of the *materia prima* available for international consumption.⁶

The women, music and other commodities are thus equated and all packaged to appeal to a recognizable masculine desire. Notably, at times, the lyrics and rhythms of the song gesture towards a subversion of hegemonic cultural norms. They stress panlatinidad and Latino pride and even posit the capacity of the music to transcend racial divisions. Nonetheless, despite this transformative power when it comes to race and nationality, the song does not even hint at a comparable ability to unite or equate individuals across established gender boundaries.

Although the parade of women in bandera bikinis may call particular attention to "Oye mi canto"—making it the veritable "poster child" for the phallogocentric and misogynist tendencies of reggaetón—it is certainly not unique. Countless other songs could be cited with equivalent, or worse, examples of lyrics and images that objectify women. These tendencies, moreover, are compounded by the dance moves that are associated with the genre and, as such, often depicted in the videos. As with the representation of female bodies described above, the *perreo* "embodies" the sexual politics avowed in the lyrics. The woman is unable to return the male gaze of her partner and, at the same time, is on display—wholly available to the gaze of the viewer. As Alfredo Nieves Moreno (2008, p. 255) observes,

In the case of reggaetón, [male superiority] is articulated from the very *perreo*, in which a woman swings her hips to the rhythm of the music while the male partner, standing right behind her, rocks slowly. In terms of discourse, reggaetón also reproduces a male domination, one that enhances the figure of the man and situates him in a position of constant symbolic authority.

In this manner, the homology between the central dance moves and the characterization of women in the songs combine to reduce femininity and female sexuality to mere accessories to be collected and exhibited.

Given the racialized and class-based associations of reggaetón, these phallogocentric tendencies can have counter-hegemonic implications. Even in these instances, however, the reaffirmation of gender inequality proves problematic. In her analysis

⁵ This opening is equally evocative of the stock imagery of other tropical genres such as salsa or merengue.

⁶ *Materia prima* would literally be translated as "raw material" in English. It can also carry the connotation of prime or first-rate material.



of Don Omar, Rudolph (2011) elucidates how he deploys established modes and models of masculinity to carve out a particular, alternative space for himself. Rudolph (2011, p. 39) presents Don Omar as a case study of how gender plays a central yet complicated role in the construction of authorial/authoritative subjects in reggaetón: “Gender relations prove crucial to the reading of reggaetón, which is dominated by men of color who ... understand their masculinity through the limitations of race and class placed on their black bodies.” In the end, she argues, Don Omar’s—and reggaetón’s—messages of sociopolitical critique, empowerment, and unity are inextricably linked with contradictory assertions of masculinist defiance.

Of course, as I have suggested earlier, the sexual politics described here are hardly unique to reggaetón. Nonetheless, the prevalence of this performance of gender—as reinforced through the trifecta of lyric, image, and dance—makes the case of reggaetón worthy of special consideration. As Moreno (2008, p. 256) also asserts, “the participation of women is circumscribed to dancing and fulfilling male desires. Women’s objectification within reggaetón eliminates almost all possibility of action and translates their presence into a prize or a trophy that men exhibit, dominate, and manipulate.” In other words, we might say that the masculinity of reggaetón offers a performance of the misogyny of other genres with the volume turned up.

Así es la vida loca: Ivy Queen and the performance of gender

Given this context—or stage, as it were—the question becomes how does a female performer fit into (or not fit into) this world of hypermasculinity. The Puerto Rican singer Martha Ivelisse Pesante—better known as Ivy Queen, and through sobriquets such as *la reina de reggaetón*, *la diva*, *la potra* and *la caballota*⁷—is arguably the first female solo artist to achieve mainstream commercial success in the genre. Not surprisingly, her singular emergence in the ultra-male-dominated world drew attention from fans and critics alike. She is praised as a feminist pioneer and denounced as a femme fatale and a sellout. Moreno (2008, p. 256) argues that her work only reinforces the commodification of women in reggaetón:

[Women’s objectification] is evident even in the songs of some female singers such as Ivy Queen, who, for example, in her song “Chika Ideal” presents herself as a lover willing to “bring along a friend” to the dance floor to satisfy her man’s “fantasies” and answer (with her body) each time he wants to “call” her.

Of course, to denounce Ivy Queen as a mere reflection of normative sexual politics would be overly simplistic. At the same time, to hail her as a shining example of feminist subversion proves equally reductive and problematic. Ivy Queen’s particular performance of gender roles both reiterates and reterritorializes the hegemonic masculinity typically advanced in reggaetón.

⁷ [Queen of Reggaeton, The Diva, The Filly, The She-Stallion].



In many ways, Ivy Queen's music is markedly different from the examples of reggaetón mentioned thus far. Unlike the more common inventory of references, images, and affirmations of male dominance discussed earlier, Ivy's songs tell stories.⁸ Not surprisingly, perhaps, these tend to feature narratives of betrayal and lost love. These songs offer examples of failed masculinity, in which the problem or crisis resides in the inability of the male characters to fulfill their desired role. In these cases, feminine subjectivity has evolved beyond the mere affirmations or responses, à la *papi, dame lo que quiero*, yet—to a large extent—they are discursively equivalent. Indeed, as Nieves Moreno (2008) points out in his critique of “Chika Ideal,” feminine agency is presented as fully circumscribed—or even at the service of—the phallogocentric system of gender.

Nonetheless, Ivy Queen's romantic twist on reggaetón constructs an active feminine subjectivity. In *bachatón* numbers such as “Dime” (2010a), the protagonist struggles to come to terms with the apparent demise of her relationship. Notably, the lyrics do not specify the gender of the *tú* that the poetic *yo* addresses, but the images of the video (along with Ivy Queen's oeuvre in general) favor a heterosexual interpretation. On the one hand, she seeks advice and guidance from her partner, “Dime, dime como hago corazón/Para sacarte de mi mente y de mi alma si tú no te quieres ir” and laments [his] absence, “Amor, vivir sin tus caricias es una maldición.”⁹ Hence, both the fulfillment of her sexual desire and her ability to recover from the melancholia of its loss depend on the actions of her lover. On the other hand, however, the lyrics also underscore a potential collaboration or partnership between the narrator and her interlocutor. She proposes a possible resolution in which they jointly recognize the “truth” of the situation: “No engañemos nuestras vidas/Encontremos las salidas/No vivamos las mentiras.”¹⁰ Moreover, toward the end of the song, the verse transitions into a bridge in which Ivy Queen slowly repeats “tú y yo.” Through this postulation of a possible “nosotros,” her lyrics construct a distinct feminine subject that actively participates in the formulation and realization of desire.

Another notable performance of this type of sexual politics can be found in “La vida es así” (2010b). The song begins in a manner reminiscent of several earlier pieces; the narrator addresses a man who has recently betrayed her. In this case, however, the discourse soon shifts to a hypothetical exchange between the purportedly scorned woman and “la otra” [the other woman]. In this exchange, Ivy Queen's poetic “I” takes a rather different position vis-à-vis patriarchal male subjectivity and heteronormativity. She describes an exchange in which she willingly bequeaths her former lover based on his undesirability—his inability to adequately perform the desired male role:

Hola, atrevida/te traigo una noticia
Por eso es mi sonrisa/Te la dará sin prisa

⁸ Of course, Ivy Queen is certainly not the only artist to record songs with narrative-based lyrics and videos. At the same, I contend that these examples constitute notable exceptions within reggaetón.

⁹ [Tell, tell me what I can do, darling/to get you out of my mind and my soul if you don't want to go] and [Love, living without your caresses is a curse].

¹⁰ [Let's not live in deceit/Let's find the way out/Let's not live lies.]



El hombre con quien sales/Es mio y tú lo sabes
 Pero aquí está el detalle/que en la cama no vale
 Por eso vine a felicitarte/De lo que me libraste
 Y tengo que confesarte/Mientras toman su tiempo
 A alguien lo estoy viendo/Un hombre de verdad y no la basura que yo tengo¹¹

Through this imagined dialogue, Ivy Queen's persona rewrites the typical narrative of betrayal and revenge. Although the opening lines of the verse point to a confrontation in which the betrayed woman will denounce her rival for "stealing her man," she shifts to a denunciation of his manhood and ability to satisfy her—and, by extension, deserve her.

Throughout the song, the protagonist (re)affirms traditional patriarchal norms of desire and gender roles, yet she nonetheless assumes an active role of agency within that system: rather than be victimized by a wayward partner, she evaluates the relative desirability of different partners and chooses one that she deems worthy. She notes and celebrates, moreover, women's ability (or right, even) to abandon men who have not satisfied them: toward the end of the song, she warns that "aquí está el detalle/si no cuidas lo tuyo/otro llegará/y la hará sentir suyo" [here is the detail/if you don't take care of what is yours/another will come along/and he will make her feel like his]. By reiterating the phrase, "aquí está el detalle," the lyrics link the failure to maintain a successful (exclusive) romantic bond to inadequacy as a lover. In this sense, taking care of "lo tuyo" is connected to both sexual and gender performance. The wandering tendencies of the partner, moreover, have afforded the opportunity for the narrator to find her own "otro," and the partner's behavior purportedly justifies her infidelity.

Through this articulation of gender roles, Ivy Queen presents a contestatory inversion of the masculinity more conventionally presented by reggaetoneros. She strips her male partner of authority, so to speak, precisely by revealing his utter inability to perform or live up to the aspirational male roles typically advanced in reggaetón. Hence, she constructs feminine authority by assessing the desirability of male partners, yet she does so precisely by reinforcing or buying into a system in which male value and authority is measured largely by the ability to conquer and possess women through sexual prowess. Her defiance therefore can be understood as an instance of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque; it reinforces the hegemonic validity of the very norms it parodies.

Her complex (and sometimes problematic) reworking of gender roles is further complicated in the video for "La vida es así" (2010b). As the lyrics describe rituals of primping and the construction of a seductive image, accompanying the lines of "me miro al espejo/me peino, me maquillo/un vestido corto, sabes lo que te digo" [I look at myself in the mirror/I brush my hair, I put on make-up/a short dress, you know what I'm saying], the video depicts the main character—portrayed by Ivy

¹¹ [Hello, miss thing < bold woman >/I have a bit of news for you/that is what my smile is about/I will tell you without rushing/the man that you are seeing/He is mine and you know it/But here is the detail/he is worthless in bed/That is why I have come to congratulate you/For what you have saved me from/And I must confess/While you are taking your time/There is someone I have been seeing/A real man and not the trash that I have now.]



Queen—in her dressing room, wearing a bathrobe and being served champagne. Hence, the quintessential moment of gendered construction and self-recognition described verbally is replaced in the visual by a scene of self-possession and dominance.¹² And it is here that she asserts her authority and denounces the shared lover as unsuitable.

Later, as the song transitions into a more overt *bachata* rhythm, the video features Ivy Queen performing the song on stage, observed by both the lover who is being cast aside and his replacement. The camera moves between shots of Ivy Queen—singing and swaying gently to the beat in her full-length gown as she caresses the microphone or gestures with her exceedingly long fingernails—and shots of the audience, replete with men and women enjoying the show. Consequently, the ability of the character to enact her desires is closely tied to Ivy Queen's ability to perform her role as *la caballota*.

Notably, furthermore, Ivy Queen's intradiegetic onstage performance is immediately preceded by the scene described earlier, in which she delivers a backstage performance for the rival. In this case, the video deviates slightly from the narrative developed in the lyrics in that the rival is portrayed as a secretary or assistant who comes to the protagonist (rather than a woman to whose house the narrator could go). In this scene, the main character dances around and touches the other woman as she reveals her secret to her. Admittedly, the interaction between the two women—beginning in the limo where they exchange highly charged glances to the scene in which Ivy Queen dances in a bathrobe for the rather provocatively dressed secretary—can and should be read as playing into the classic iconography of girl-on-girl scenes found in mainstream media and heterosexual porn. In this sense, the scene mirrors (or even makes good on) the offer made in “Chika Ideal,” as analyzed by Nieves Moreno (2008). Nonetheless, the apparent objectification is complicated by the main character's ability to control the situation and achieve her desired ends—both onstage and off—through her ability to perform for her audience.

Of course, any discussion of Ivy Queen—and certainly one addressing gender—must account for her persona. As mentioned earlier, numerous nicknames are associated with the singer, many of which highlight her position as markedly feminine in a decidedly masculine setting: *la potra*, *la caballota*, and even *la reina de reggaeton*. Her typical wardrobe and accessories could best be described as hyperfeminine, consisting predominantly of skin-tight pants/tops and elaborate gowns, vertiginously high heels, ornate jewelry and the hyperbolically long and often ornately decorated fingernails. Through this garb, along with her trademark *voz ronca* [hoarse voice] (or *voz de hombre* [man's voice], as it is sometimes described), Ivy Queen's (hyper)femininity approximates that of a drag queen.

Báez (2006) has carefully examined how Ivy Queen consciously constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs gender over the course of her musical career. Báez notes how the singer's image evolves and shifts over time. She argues that these manipulations of aesthetic codification—along with statements about gender roles

¹² Notably, Vazquez (2008) reads the use of this imagery in Ivy Queen's music in terms of traditions associated with salons—a shared female space in which femininity itself is constructed (e.g., the beauty salon) and a space of philosophical inquiry and dialogue (the *salon*).



made in interviews—inevitably dialogue with Ivy Queen’s lyrics. In this way, as with Rudolph’s (2011) assessment of masculinity, Báez (2006) evaluates how Ivy Queen’s intercalation of hegemony and individual defiance proves problematic and potentially undermines her ability to effectively embody alternative female empowerment. While I certainly endorse this astute cautionary note, I also want to underscore the subversive potential that exists not only despite but precisely because of these contradictions. That is, taken in its entirety, Ivy Queen’s performance of gender weaves together ultra-conventional (and potentially conservative) markers of femininity and masculinity, overtly feminist challenges to patriarchy, and ambiguous sexual desires. It thus brings together, in a single desiring and speaking subject, an array of diverse and contradictory codes in a way that fundamentally destabilizes traditional dichotomies of gender and sexuality. In the end, Ivy Queen’s performance of gender is fundamentally queer, in that it combines conventionally feminine and masculine attributes, re-positions the intersection of gender and sexual desire, and constantly calls attention to itself as a construct.

Moreover—as scholars such as Lawrence Fountain-Stokes (2009), Manalansan (2003), Muñoz (1999), and Rivera-Servera (2012) have cogently argued—this type of queer performance of gender acquires particular significance in a transcultural context. Hegemonic rituals and signifiers can attain multiple and multidirectional layers of meaning that call into question the assumptions that undergird their hegemony. At the same time, the authority of their hegemony can be deployed by marginalized subjects in a transcultural context to assert the legitimacy of their cultural heritage against a dominant public sphere that displaces and/or effaces their cultural distinctiveness.¹³ Similarly, in the case of Ivy Queen, her performance of gender clearly reiterates and reinforces established patterns of patriarchy, both within and beyond reggaetón. At the same time, nonetheless, her work also destabilizes the absolute hegemony of male dominance by introducing paradigms of multidirectional interaction and persistent mobility (rather than unilateral/unidirectional consumption) that ultimately construct a translocal meta-poetics of gender.

The gendered turn of “Vendetta”

Given this relationship with poetics of gender, it is perhaps not surprising that the question of gender takes center stage in the title track from Ivy Queen’s *Vendetta* (2015b). According to the singer herself, the song was composed in response to the sexism she has experienced as a performer. As Báez (2006) underscores, the singer has often affirmed her rights to express herself and to evolve through her personal style as well as her music. Not only have her wardrobe choices been decried as both insufficiently and exceeding feminine, but critics accused her of selling out when she shifted to a more typically sexualized image. Báez (2006, p. 72) notes how Ivy Queen took this charge on directly and offered an alternative explanation: “In many

¹³ As Manalansan (2003) argues in the case of Filipino gay men in New York, for example, particular Catholic rituals become a site of resistance and alternative subject formation—even when these are the very rituals that conventionally refuse and repress their sexuality in the Philippines.



press articles, IQ repeatedly constructs herself as an agent in her new self-invention, emphasizing that she did not make these changes to her image because she was trying to fit certain standards of beauty. Instead, she attributes this change in appearance to her growth as a person and an artist.” In this sense, Ivy Queen consciously cultivates—and alters—her image in dialogue with prescribed gender norms and how they are deployed to police (to use Báez’s term) her gender and sexuality.

Báez also notes how the singer emphasizes conventional tropes of femininity alongside her more provocative gender play (e.g., highlighting her marriage to El Gran Omar). Along similar lines, after becoming pregnant, Ivy Queen addresses both the significance of maternity and decries the media’s response to this development. In the lyrics of “Vendetta” (2015a) she recounts the discrimination she encountered during her pregnancy and denounces the hypocrisy and inauthenticity of those that dismiss her.

Recuerdo aquel día de la gran noticia
 La reina embarazada, que clase de primicia
 Y a mis espaldas, yo solo escuchaba
 Mejor contrato a otro, la tipa está pagada.
 No podemos traerla, tampoco invitarla
 Como si yo tuviera un virus o estuviera muerta
 Que clase de infelices, yo nací para cantar
 Este es mi oxígeno, y así me lo querían quitar.¹⁴

Through this narration, Ivy Queen satirizes the treatment of her pregnant body as a pathological site of disease/death to be eschewed and, in Foucauldian terms, barred from the shared space of social and performative discourse. More specifically, in her ventriloquizing of these dismissals, she emphasizes how this aberrant condition signals the termination or exhaustion of her artistic abilities and leads them to seek a markedly male alternative: “otro.” She also denounces this treatment as denying her access to the very elements she needs to survive.¹⁵

The lyrical structure of the song can be divided into three sections, a chorus intercalated with two sets of verses (along with a brief prelude and coda).

Prelude
 Chorus
 Verses I
 Chorus
 Verses II
 Chorus
 Coda

¹⁴ [I remember that day of the big news/The queen pregnant/what a scoop/And behind my back/I only heard/I better hire someone else/she is over./We can't bring her/or invite her/As if I had a virus or were dead/What miserable people/I was born to sing/This is my oxygen, and like this they want to take it away from me.]

¹⁵ Later in the song, Ivy Queen links this restriction not just to the physical but to female labor and economic needs: earning potential and the ability to support her daughter.



The chorus, which repeats without variation, asserts the singer's legitimacy. It specifically cites her independence, her site-specific formation ("porque me crié en la calle" [because I was raised in the streets]), and her ability to not only survive but progress ("porque estoy de pie, no voy para atrás" [because I'm standing, I won't go back]) as the sources of her authority and power, and it identifies the song as vengeance against those who have mistreated and underestimated her. In the first section of verses (cited earlier), Ivy Queen depicts how her pregnancy was received and avers how—rather than fall victim to such discrimination—she will demonstrate her resilience and exact her musical revenge. In the second set of verses, she draws connections among her experiences and broader issues of gender inequality and injustice: "por eso este mundo está mal dividido/está equivocado y está mal repartido" [that is why this world is badly divided/it is wrong and badly distributed].

The more formal sections of the lyrics, which I am classifying as a prelude and coda, are framed by brief editorializing on the song itself. The prelude launches the song, "let's go" comments that "Woo! That track is the shit," and—as is often the case in contemporary urban genres—emphatically articulates the name of the performer and song, "I-Vy Queen ... Vendetta ...vy Queen ..." At the end of the song, following the third repetition of the chorus, Ivy Queen concludes with a series of sonorous interjections and an affirmation of the song's avowed purpose: "Eso es así. ¿Querían vendetta? [La mía es Vendetta. Mía Vendetta].¹⁶ Yes, sir. Yes, sir." These sections of the song are distinct from the chorus and verses they frame in the singing style—emceeding or talking style—and in their overt use of English. Although metatextual references to the song as a "vendetta" can be found throughout the lyrics, these sections also highlight a kind of external evaluation or reflection on the song as a whole. As with "La vida es así," through these references to the song itself and the citation of her record as a performer, the stage becomes a site for refusing the interpellation of her as a victim and for asserting her mobility and her superior authority.

In this essay I do not engage in a sustained examination of the music. I would like to point out, however, how it compares with other tracks (both from *Vendetta: The Project* and earlier albums) and styles generally associated with Ivy Queen's music. As is evinced by the examples of "Dime" and "La vida es así" cited earlier, Ivy Queen often incorporates specific rhythms and influences (instruments, artists, dance moves) from other Caribbean genres in her music. In the case of her most recent album, *Vendetta: The Project*, this trend is taken a step further: four separate sub-albums or versions of the album are released, characterized as—respectively—salsa, bachata, urban and hip-hop. All four of the albums in the "project" are titled *Vendetta*, but the title track appears only in the hip-hop collection. Moreover, "Vendetta" includes minimal instrumentation and melodic development, even when compared with the other seven tracks on the same sub-album. Hence, when examined alongside other contemporaneous songs as well as to previous singles

¹⁶ [That's how it is. You wanted a vendetta?].



released by the singer, “Vendetta” is noticeably devoid of elements of Puerto Rican musical traditions¹⁷; instead, it is limited almost exclusively to Ivy Queen’s lyrics with a prominent backbeat.¹⁸

In this way, the four-disc collection references and expands on the singer’s trajectory as a performer and recording artist. Notably, rather than emphasize the transnational status of reggaetón, Ivy Queen specifically underscores her ability to reach across existing boundaries of nation and genre. In this sense, the “project” of *Vendetta* is to carve out an even more transnational and translocal musical soundscape than the one conventionally associated with the transcultural trajectory of reggaetón. Along lines similar to the prelude and coda of the song itself, *Vendetta* both dialogues with and sits outside the delineated terrain of these traditions.

The corresponding video also takes up these themes of the singer’s evolved/evolving position and poetics. It features Ivy Queen performing “Vendetta” along with an amalgam of sequences depicting her on stage, on tour, and with other artists. In the principal scene of the video (the one in which she is performing “Vendetta”),¹⁹ her image is decidedly different from the hyperfeminine persona described earlier. She appears in a suit, featuring suspenders, a completely buttoned dress shirt, and a bow tie. Her hair is cropped in a short bob. Indeed, the only obvious remnant of her trademark look are her long, brightly painted fingernails—which she brushes through the short, blonde hairs along her forehead in a deliberate, stylized manner several times during the video (Fig. 2).

The nails do not constitute a lone feminine signifier, however; Ivy Queen’s look also includes prominent, jeweled earrings in the shape of the Chanel logo (made more prominent by the short haircut) and bright red lipstick that matches her bow tie and suspenders. In this manner, the singer’s appearance not only overtly engages masculine and feminine adornments but also underscores connections or interplay between these attributes.

In the “archival footage” that is intercut with this principal scene of performance, Ivy Queen appears with long hair (presumably wigs in several cases), elaborate costumes, and, in several cases, the type of vertiginously high heels discussed earlier. The camera angles and particular sequences included, moreover, present her body as highly sexual(ized): at one point, for example, the camera is positioned at ground (or stage) level behind the singer, calling attention to her buttocks (obscured only by wide-patterned stockings and a tutu-like skirt around her waist), thigh-high boots, and a corset (Fig. 3).

Not only do these images accentuate her (in)famous, hyperfeminine image, they also feature her collaborations with an array of established male performers of hip-

¹⁷ I do not mean to suggest that hip-hop is decidedly un-Puerto Rican. As Flores (2008) and others have noted, Puerto Rican artists and audiences played a foundational role in the development of hip-hop. The genre, however, is not as primarily associated with Caribbean locations or communities as the other genres discussed here.

¹⁸ The track is not devoid of any instrumentation or melodic development; rather, these elements are markedly reduced when examined in the context of Ivy Queen’s songbook or oeuvre.

¹⁹ In fact, this scene is presumably the only one filmed expressly for the video. The rest of the video consists of “archival footage,” images and sequences that were filmed earlier and not originally intended for this specific use.



hop, reggaetón, and tropical genres. Most notably, perhaps, this footage includes several images of Ivy Queen posing in low-cut pants and a short top, prominently exposing a very pregnant abdomen. In the visual structure of the video, therefore, the transvestism or transgendered imagery of the principal footage frames a concatenation of representations of the artist that mark both her femininity and her transcultural musical lineage or genealogy. In this way, the architecture of the video mirrors the lyrical structure: the historical trajectory and treatment of the singer are framed by overt assertions of her legitimacy and authority, which are, in turn, directly linked to her ability to position herself outside of conventional delineations of identity.

In addition to the elements of wardrobe already discussed, the other two accessories featured prominently in the video are microphones and hair clippers. Both are featured at the beginning and the end of the video, in which Ivy Queen is shown—as with “*La vida es así*”—in front of a mirror surrounded by theatrical lights.²⁰ In the first scene, the clippers and a single, bejeweled microphone are shown lying in front of the mirror. Toward the end of the video, we see the singer reach for the clippers and—in a sequence reminiscent of Frida Kahlo’s famous painting—crop her hair into an even shorter buzz cut with spikes on the top of her head (Fig. 4).

The clippers appear only in these initial and final sequences. The bejeweled microphone, however, can also be seen during the principal performance scene as well as in the singer’s hand as she exits the “backstage” area. In the principal performance scene, moreover, the jewel-encrusted microphone is accompanied by approximately twenty additional microphones (of varying heights, styles, and historical periods) that surround Ivy Queen.²¹ Not only does this multiplication of microphones seem excessive, but Ivy Queen even drapes her jacket over one of them before launching into the initial chorus of “*Vendetta*”—thus signaling its status as superfluous in the capturing or projecting of sound. Given the ways that they are framed in numerous shots, these objects become a kind of punctum that is emphasized to the point of hyperbolic exaggeration: the striking insistence on masculinity calls attention to its very tenuousness as a construct.

The questioning of her ability to assume a masculine persona might seem to undercut her claims to authority. Nonetheless, the imagery of the video—along with the lyrics it accompanies—ultimately combine to challenge interpellation. The singer refuses to be limited by gendered signifiers and cites her musical ability and long (and ongoing) history of musical production as her most effective retort against such limitations. Her “*vendetta*” ultimately rests on her capacity to manipulate the codes, to occupy both traditional and nontraditional subject positions. She evokes highly normative markers of masculinity and femininity in order to lay claim to a fluidity that allows her to stand outside (and above) conventional roles.

²⁰ In this case, she is not in a dressing room per se, but the style of the mirror, the surrounding space, and the placement of these images in the video suggest a backstage or preparatory area adjacent to the performance space of the principal scene.

²¹ As with the montage of images, the inclusion of microphones associated with distinct historical periods could also signal a kind of lineage and *longue durée* of artistic presence: that is, they position her as the rightful heir of generations of musical performers/genres and also point to her ability to transcend ephemeral success.





Fig. 2 Ivy Queen, as she appears in the opening sequence of “Vendetta”



Fig. 3 Ivy Queen, in a performance featured in the footage included in “Vendetta”

Flirting with trouble: Trans-poetics and reggaetón

In the title of this essay, I reference John Gill’s (1995) paraphrasing of the gender discordance articulated in The Kinks’ “Lola” (1970): “I’m not dumb, but I can’t understand/Why she walk like a woman but talk like a man.” As Gill evinces, the Kinks’ title and lyrics underscore how international rock music of this era is deeply rooted in a kind of gender ambiguity and play that had already formed part of musical (and performance) traditions for decades. Gill suggests that the poetics of





Fig. 4 The clippers and bejeweled microphone, along with Ivy Queen’s elaborately manicured fingernails

gender and sexuality embodied by mainstream icons such as Jim Morrison, Mick Jagger and David Bowie allows for a queering—or, at the very least, a querying—of what constitutes possible and productive desires. In a similar manner, Ivy Queen’s gender performativity calls into question dominant norms and their concomitant limitations. Given her vocal register and her ability to occupy ambiguous positions as a desiring subject, she could certainly be characterized as “talking like a man.” Moreover, her ability to transcend classic gender paradigms seemingly allows her to “go where no woman has gone before,” granting her access to the hypermasculine and male-dominated world of reggaetón.

Not surprisingly (albeit interestingly), the reception of Ivy Queen’s work seemingly reproduces this paradoxical pairing of the queer and the hegemonic. Although she has not achieved the kind of crossover or mainstream success enjoyed by her male counterparts, her success is singular among female performers in the genre. Her identity, moreover, is consistently linked to this exceptional status, as is evinced in sobriquets such as “la reina de reggaetón” and “la caballota.” When she tours outside of Puerto Rico, she frequently appears in LGBTQ or queer-identified venues.²² At the same time, fans regularly assert her extraordinary (re)affirmation of identifiable gender roles. In a comment posted to YouTube, for example, Julio M. (2015) advises,

Que no les engañen sus rasgos fuertes y su voz, Ivy Queen es una mujer en todo el sentido de la palabra (incluso es mamá)... a la que escuchamos por sus grandes letras porque a pesar de cantar Música Urbana, Rap o Reggaetón no necesita hablar de sexo.... Ivy Queen, la Caballota esa es ella :).²³

²² Overtly queer performers of reggaetón have emerged, several of which Vazquez (2008) discusses in her essay. While less successful commercially, their reterritorializing of the genre reaffirms and extends the queer potential evinced in Ivy Queen’s work.

²³ [Don’t let her strong features and voice fool you, Ivy Queen is a woman in every sense of the word (she is even a mother) ... who we listen to because of her great lyrics because despite singing Urban Music, Rap, or Reggaeton she doesn’t need to talk about sex. ... Ivy Queen, the She-Stallion, that is her.]



He thus acknowledges the aberrant or discordant components of the singer's appearance and styles yet nonetheless asserts her femininity and her ability to "outperform" more conventional artists.

By occupying an exceptional position, Ivy Queen can acceptably expand the boundaries without being seen as fundamentally challenging their validity. At the same time, her work—and, in particular, her image/persona—is often ridiculed and dismissed as a pathetic imitation of the gender paradigms commonly found in reggaetón. In this sense, as with drag, her performance of gender is tamed or delegitimized by its reduction to a farce. Nonetheless, *as with drag*, both the gendered subjectivity she constructs and its reception offer critical insight into normativity at its limits. It challenges dominant values both in its ability and its failure to adequately reproduce them.

I therefore contend that Ivy Queen's performance of gender opens up a space for a reterritorialization of gender in reggaetón. To be sure, her work systematically plays into and reaffirms phallogocentric and misogynistic tropes, yet it also injects contradiction and complexity into those tropes. In the end, as Barthes (1988) suggests, her performative "grains" promote active engagement and elucidate what *is not* but *could be*. In this sense, although it is far from a radical rejection of dominant norms, Ivy Queen's work presents just enough contradiction to queer the dominant hypermasculinity of reggaetón. It faithfully reproduces established semiotics of the genre, yet it also invites us to call the limitations of those semiotics into question, thereby advancing their critical potential.

In the end, Ivy Queen's performance highlights the self-reinforcing triangulation of gender, power, and mass culture. Mass culture formulaically reproduces commodified forms in a way that reduces semiotics: specific iterations of a particular genre must look and sound sufficiently similar to be recognizable as such. Nonetheless, as Adorno (2002) convincingly argues, music has a particular capacity to trouble norms of commodification and consumption. That is, even as mass culture tends to promote homogeneity and the reduction of meaning, music possesses inherent apertures of polyvalence that can be deployed to disrupt (however minorly) such tendencies.

Ivy Queen's particular deployment of established codes disquiets the role of gender and therefore disrupts its tendency to reinforce hegemonic structures of power—both within and beyond reggaetón. She calls attention to the architecture of gender and empowerment and, more importantly, positions herself as a fluid subject able to weave together cultural signifiers that emerge from diverse traditions and locations. Her work thus constructs an alternative space of performance and performativity that draws on the phallogocentric, misogynist, and homophobic roots of reggaetón yet also reterritorializes them within a poetics of alternative, intersectional self-fashioning.

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